

For the sake of our Lao brothers, please do not disseminate any of the information contained in this report.

CONFIDENTIAL

LAO CHURCH REPORT: REASONS FOR CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

In 1978, 18-year-old Bounmee (pseudonym) fled the oppressive Communist regime of the Lao PDR in search of a bright future and an education. As it turned out, in his two years in the Nong Khai camp in Thailand, he did indeed find a bright future -- he found Christ. But then, instead of going on to the U.S., or France or Australia, or elsewhere where Lao refugees resettle, he returned to his family in Vientiane. And there he is fulfilling his dream of an education -- Bounmee is enrolled in a science program at Don Dok teacher's training college. He is also active in the Vientiane congregation of the Lao Evangelical Church. And if he enrolls in the religion course at Don Dok he will be required to read the Bible (which is available in the college library) in his research.

A few young Khmu Christians from Laos have been sent to Moscow for further education. Instead of losing their faith, they have been a source of encouragement to the Russian believers in the church they attend in Moscow.

The Minister of Education, Sports, and Religion is well-informed about the Bible and enjoys discussing it, asking intelligent questions.

The above are a few unexpected circumstances giving reason for optimism and excitement regarding the church situation in Laos. While we were keenly interested in finding out all about the church and in talking with the Christians, that was not the purpose of our visit. We felt it wise not to give the church a high profile on our first visit. As a result, we did not feel free to spend time after church talking with Christians. While we did receive some information about the church, we have far more questions that are still unanswered. God's timing manifested itself in giving us the opportunity of talking to Bee Thao, one of the pastors of the Vientiane church, on our first evening in Laos. We visited Titus and Linda Peachey of MCC, as Titus was leaving for Savannakhet

the next morning. While we were there, Bee Thao came in. So we had a good opportunity to ask him about the church situation.

Sunday we were privileged to attend the worship service. There were 40 adults in attendance, and 12 of them were young people. We were informed that the attendance was somewhat smaller than usual as many people were in the fields transplanting rice. The service was held in the Vietnamese church in town, and consisted of hymns, prayers, and a responsive reading, as well as an offering and a sermon. Eliyah, who has only been with the Vietnamese church about two months, preached, using Eph. 5:8 as his text. He spoke on our behavior as Christians. "As Christians, if our spirit sins, whose spirit is that?" he asked. He then used Jn 3:7 to show that if we are born of Christ we are no longer under the world. We have not only been born in the body, but also in the spirit. If we are in darkness, how can we conquer the darkness (Jn 1:5)? If we are reborn under Christ we are no longer under the world. We must be under God's authority, not under the authority of Satan. We are all under authority -- either that of God or that of sin. If we eat the wrong food and therefore become thin and unhealthy, then we change our diet. If we are under the wrong authority and therefore our spiritual health suffers, then we should change our authority.

The formal church program is limited to Sundays: from 8:00 - 9:00 a.m. is the Young People's program; from 9:00 - 10:00, Sunday School; and from 10:00 - 11:00 is the Worship service. During the announcements we were reminded that "it is only 5 or 6 months until Christmas!" and we were therefore admonished to begin preparing songs and plays.

After the service we had an opportunity to meet Bee Thao, the Hmong pastor; Eliyah, the Khmu pastor; elder Bountheng; and the pastor for Luang Prabang (a graduate of the Laos Bible Training Center in Vientiane). We did not see Rev. and Mrs. Saly Khunthapanya, but were told they were in good health.